

Training practice assessors: An innovative approach

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Summary: In the UK, graduate level training for Social Workers became compulsory in 2003. Assessed practice had been a valued aspect of social work training in the UK and was given even greater emphasis on the new degree. There was, however, limited guidelines regarding the assessment role, which is carried out by specifically trained practitioners. This article reviews the development and implementation of a new course, designed to provide good quality assessors for the new degree. A significant aspect is the partnership working between a Local Authority and University and this is fully explored.

Keywords: practice assessors; partnership; training; innovation; course delivery

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Introduction

This article reviews the development of a new course, the Graduate Certificate in Practice Assessing (the Certificate) between an English Local Authority, West Sussex Social and Caring Services (the Local Authority), and the University of Chichester (the University).

The two organisations benefit from a longstanding partnership and worked together on the planning of a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Social Work course, which was based on clear guidelines from the General Social Care Council (GSCC; the body responsible for regulating Social Workers conduct and training in the UK). There was less clarity, however, about the newly created role of Practice Assessor and there was also uncertainty because the national Post Qualifying (PQ) Framework was due for revision. Despite this, the partnership believed it was important to train Assessors specifically for the Social Work degree and took the decision to develop a new course in time for the first cohort of students.

The Practice Assessor role: Background and developments.

In many countries a degree had been the basic social work qualification for some years. In the UK, however, a graduate qualification was introduced in the early years of the 21st century (DoH, 2002), following a lengthy campaign by both academic and social work representatives. The first degree courses began in 2003.

It has long been accepted in the UK that the assessment of practice has an equal standing to academic assessment. This assessment was carried out by a Practice Teacher; a qualified practitioner who had undertaken five days basic training or had successfully completed the Practice Teaching Award. The award was accredited by Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), the precursor of the GSCC (CCETSW, 1991). The Practice Teaching Award is still running in some areas throughout the UK.

When guidance for the new degree was published (DOH 2002), the term Practice Assessor was utilised as opposed to Practice Teacher. Little guidance was given regarding the training or minimum requirements

for those undertaking the Practice Assessor role. However, the term did imply a 'reductionist' approach which could be predominantly based on assessment and less on the traditional Practice Teaching tasks of teaching, case management and supporting learning as well as of assessment (Evans, 1999). The lack of guidance resulted in debates regarding the role and training of the Practice Assessor. Furness and Gilligan (2004) asked important questions about Practice Teachers and Assessors, such as will they receive appropriate training, rewards and recognition for the role. In their conclusion, they firstly recognise that service users and employers need professionally qualified Social Workers 'fit for practice'. Secondly, that the availability of such workers is dependent on the provision of adequate funding for practice learning and the provision of appropriate training, structured support and genuine affirmation for Practice Assessors involved in its delivery.

The lack of guidance resulted in a variety of courses being offered nationally. Some Universities continued to offer Practice Teaching Award courses, considered by some as the 'gold standard' of its type. Others developed short training courses that provided National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) rather than academic or PQ credits (2004, TOPSS). A different approach was the creation of a completely new type of course, specifically designed to meet the needs of qualifying training courses, but which sought to resolve the issues raised by Furness and Gilligan (2004). This was the preferred option of the Local Authority who decided to develop a new course in partnership with the University.

Working in partnership had benefits for both parties; local authority staff could gain academic and PQ credits and the University was guaranteed an agreed number of placements.

The development of the Certificate

The development team was made up of staff from both the Local Authority and the University. It was agreed that it was important to maintain the teaching, supporting and case management roles of the Practice Teacher, along with the assessment element. The Local Authority, however, had previously sponsored staff onto a Practice Teaching Award course at another University and feedback from both

social workers and their line managers was that the course was very demanding on time. Frequently, practitioners opted to have a 'year off' when they completed their training, because the experience had been so demanding. Records showed that this frequently led to them never supervising another student. The aim of the development team, therefore, was to design a course that produced good quality Practice Assessors and was also realistically achievable by busy social workers (Thompson, 2005).

There is also a history in the UK of a shortage of practice placements. In the Local Authority, the voluntary and independent sector was a valuable resource that was particularly under-utilised. An agreed aim of the development team was to increase the number of applicants from this sector. Staff in these settings tended not to be qualified social workers and this was another factor to consider in the design and planning of the course. The organisation, teaching methods and assessment procedures therefore needed to be very carefully planned in order to attract applications from a variety of settings and qualifications. It was therefore agreed to utilise the specific skills of the Local Authority's Training Officers.

The Local Authority places great importance on the provision of good quality practice placements and has a team of Training Officers whose role includes acting as Off-site Practice Assessors and providing support and guidance about the activity for practitioners. As they are employees of the Local Authority and spend much of their time working with practitioners, they understand the pressures that social work staff experience on a daily basis. They are also very experienced Practice Assessors, and assess a number of qualifying students each academic year. The partnership, therefore, agreed that the Training Officers would be responsible for organising, teaching and tutoring on the course.

This led to the major innovation of deciding to formally appoint a Training Officer as Module Leader, a role traditionally carried out by University staff. The Module Leader has responsibility for all aspects of the course, from recruitment, planning, coordinating teaching, organising and allocating appropriate tutor support and assessment, through to meeting University requirements regarding appropriate evaluation procedures and reporting to University quality assurance panels. The University nominated a Programme Coordinator, who had responsibility for ensuring the course met academic requirements, liaising with the external examiner and acted as a moderator in the assessment process.

The resulting course

The resulting course built on the positive aspects of the Practice Teaching Award in that, on completion, qualified social workers were awarded academic and post qualifying credits, non-social workers were awarded the academic credits alone. The content was also similar because the development team wanted to maintain the teaching, support and development roles of the Practice Teacher. The seven teaching days included ethics and values, adult learning, management of practice learning, assessment, linking theory and research to practice, reflective practice and giving and receiving feedback.

The innovation, the appointment of a Training Officer as module leader, ensured that details such as setting teaching dates, assignments and assessment were considered in conjunction with the demands of the student placement for practitioners, thus avoiding clashes and ensuring a manageable task. Teaching was also specifically planned to prepare candidates for each stage of the placement well in advance, and specific guidance could be given as appropriate.

An evaluation of the course

The aim of the development team was to produce quality Practice Assessors who are appropriately trained to carry out the task and who are willing to continue practice assessing. Two cohorts have now completed the course and have evaluated it positively, particularly valuing tutor input. More significant, however, is the higher number who decided to supervise another student straight away. 25% from the first intake immediately took a second student and this has risen to 40% on completion of the second intake. In contrast, only 12% from the final intake of the previous Practice Teaching Course took a second student. This is a vitally important benefit for both the Local Authority and the University. Applications have also increased by 60% for both the second and third intakes. Despite attempts, including free places on the course, to increase the number of applicants from the voluntary and independent sector, their numbers have remained at approximately 10%. This is an area that needs further development. Those who do

complete the course, however, have been successful and evaluated it well.

The success of the course can be directly linked to the Module Leader, who has been able to respond to candidate evaluation and feedback from the teaching team, qualifying students and course members. The Module Leader is not a member of the University staff, but is empowered to make appropriate changes to the University course, such as an increase in teaching time. A particularly important change, however, was the decision to teach 50% of the course at a venue in the geographical centre of the county. The Local Authority is a large rural county and long travel times to the University added to the time demands for practitioners, frequently leading to low attendance rates. Alternate venues are successful because candidates have access to University facilities and, for many, the benefit of reduced travel time. Attendance rates have improved and practitioners are attending from geographical areas (furthest from the University) where there is a shortage of Practice Assessors.

Changes were made by the Module Leader in consultation with the Programme Coordinator and were accepted because of the high level of trust between the two organisations. This positive partnership approach is the basis of the success of the course and deserves further discussion.

The importance of partnership working

The terms partnership and collaboration along with associated phrases such as co-operation, consultation and coordination have been in the literature of social work education for a number of years (Mitchell 2001, Clifford et al 2002, Rafferty and Taylor 2004). Payne (1994), who critically analysed the development of the Diploma in Social Work, gives a clear critique of the concept of partnership between universities and social work agencies being based on the false analogy of the 'romantic-ideal' of partnership in marriage and business. Instead, he advocated the development of a network of structured relationships between universities and agencies.

Gorman (2000, p.68), in attempting to define collaboration in community care and primary care, identifies a continuum between the

concepts of coordination, consultation, collaboration and partnership. 'Coordination and consultation would appear to be the precursors to collaboration, with partnership being a further and possibly ultimate goal..... Collaboration may be interpreted as a stage that leads to partnership, a term that implies a fuller commitment'.

In a sense the relationship between the two organisations that developed the course started at the other end to the Gorman continuum because the fuller commitment was already in place. The structured relationships as advocated by Payne were also evident. The Certificate was the result of collaboration between Training Officers and University staff. This collaboration, in the sense of staff working together on a joint project, was based on a long-standing partnership involving the development and delivery of both qualifying and PQ social work education. The collaboration over the development of the Certificate was, therefore, both organisational and individual, involving consultation and co-operation as well as coordination and collaboration.

Conclusion

Burgess (2004) makes the point that short time frame constraints could have resulted in the new social work degree comprising of adapted modules rather than re-designed modules leading to greater creativity and increased participation by stakeholders. This could have applied to the Certificate, but we believe that although there were time constraints, the resulting course was innovative in both content and process. The development team are aware, however, that important aspects were affected by time constraints. For example, the team did initially consider an all encompassing generic course which would equip staff to assess at all academic and professional levels, such as for PQ and NVQ and preliminary discussions were held with local occupational therapy colleagues with a view to making the course multi-professional. Developing such a course would have taken more time, however, and the decision was made to focus on a course which would be ready for the first intake of the new degree and would meet the specific needs of qualifying social workers.

Another shortcoming, which was the result of time constraints, was the omission of input from service users. Appropriate networks were

not in place to identify people and who could have been involved at short notice. The development team acknowledge that this is one of the shortcomings identified by Burgess. The team are rectifying this situation by planning projects that give service users the opportunity to input on the course; sharing their experiences of having both a student social worker and an assessor in training working with them.

The major innovation of a university programme being organised and delivered by Local Authority Training Officers rather than University staff was achieved because of the long-standing collaboration between the two agencies. The University had long accepted Training Officers as associate lecturers, recognising the competence of Local Authority staff to deliver the programme, albeit with quality assurance clearly the responsibility of the School of Social Studies. The appointment of a Training Officer as Module Leader was therefore a logical step in the development of the partnership. This concurs with Burgess's view that if participation is to be meaningful it will take many years, and a strong degree of collaboration to build the understanding and mutual trust required.

The authors have found that little has been written about the international aspects of practice assessing in social work. It could be that the model proposed in this article could have relevance in those countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, that are developing social work training. The importance of training assessors of practice in a way that has credibility to social work agencies and staff willing to be trained is vital. The model that we have proposed here could be worth exploring further both in this country and abroad.

The development team was aware that the PQ framework was under review while the Certificate was being developed, but was determined not to let 'planning blight' delay development. Subsequently, new requirements have been published by the GSCC. The team has been advised that the Certificate will meet the new requirements for the Higher Specialist Award, which will form part of the new PQ structure, with little amendment. We are, therefore, pleased that we were not deterred from creating a course that has successfully ran twice, providing significant numbers of Practice Assessors and placements for qualifying students.

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